Ground Personnel and Mobile Equipment Fatality File

BLIND SPOT: MINERS DIED WHILE THEIR BOSSES REFUSED SAFETY EQUIPMENT

ORACLE, Arizona – Thomas Benavidez never came home that Father's Day.

His wife and three children knew he had to work, so they didn't make plans to celebrate that Sunday. Instead, they spent it trying to confirm rumors of his death that swirled through this Arizona community of fewer than 4,000 people and quickly spread alongside details of a mining accident posted to Facebook.

Police photos from the scene show the flipped pickup truck Benavidez had parked in an open-pit copper mine in 2010. A 240-ton truck the size of a two-story house, designed to lug rock, drove over the smaller vehicle, flattening it. Benavidez, 52, was caught in one of the haul truck's blind spots and crushed to death.

The mining industry has known for decades about these blind spots and the role they played in dozens of deaths. All the while, the U.S. Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) has pushed companies to install readily available and relatively cheap safety features that, it says, could save lives.

A Center for Public Integrity review of MSHA investigative reports, police files and court documents reveals that weak oversight has mixed with mistakes at mines to deadly effect, as the industry and its regulators bicker over proposed rules. Various types of heavy machinery have directly or indirectly been involved in nearly 500 deaths, dozens of them caused by blind spots, at underground and surface mines since 2000, according to MSHA data.

A recent analysis by the agency found that 23 deaths could have

been avoided in surface mines alone between 2003 and 2018 if heavy machinery were equipped with safety measures such as backup cameras, proximity sensors or other collision-warning systems.

Benavidez suffered one of those avoidable deaths when a haul truck driver, even after following the mine’s safety protocols, never saw Benavidez’s Chevrolet pickup and drove over it. A mechanic in the seat next to Benavidez was extricated from the vehicle, but with serious injuries.